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## Opening the Book on Literature's Future

■ At a symposium, a group based at UCLA discusses its radical predictions for printed media.

By SUSAN SALTER REYNOLDS, TIMES STAFF WRITER

On the UCLA campus, in a room devoid of textiles--just cement, wires and screens--a group of about 150 people discussed the future of books, literature, words. These people, gathered for a recent Symposium on Electronic Literature, don't think of books in terms others do, the printed word, the rustle of a turning page. They speak of a "new literary movement." They are building "a new kind of subjectivity." They are trying to recapture, "to salvage the human inside of technology."

The Electronic Literature Organization has its headquarters on the UCLA campus, as a joint project of the media arts department and the English department. The group is not in the business of e-books, a phenomenon that seems to have come and gone, but of something much more revolutionary.

These people play with words, images and technology in ways that involve the viewer/reader much more physically in the act of viewing and reading. In their world, computers and bodies speak to each other; they make things together. A person does not simply tell or read a story; a person is actively involved in unfolding the story. There is hypertext, clicking and referencing and deepening a work layer by layer. In some cases, holographic poems can be thrown like baseballs. The technology changes every day.

There is less authority regarding what is good and what is bad. There is no canon, though there is a body of work, some a decade old, that can be referenced the way the rest of us might compare a work of art to Shakespeare or De Kooning. These include William Gibson's "xanadu," a story that disintegrated bit by bit over a six-month period, and Michael Joyce's "Aftermath," the first electronic literary book with hypertext links.

There are related classes on campuses around the country. Robert Coover, author of, most recently, the book "Ghost Town," teaches classes at Brown University on Web writing and hypertext. There is even a Review of

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Electronic Literature. But few of the other institutions that help the dissemination of literature as we know it, like a publishing industry and distribution and marketing networks, are in place. This appears to be a blessing and a curse.

Katherine Hayles, the doyenne of electronic literature and author of the printed book "How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics," is a professor of English and design/media arts at UCLA. She was the first speaker at the conference, a woman in a pink kimono surrounded by screens and wires. The topic she raised, which seemed to inflame the audience, is the question of obsolescence.

"In the interest of building a canon," she said, "we cannot reject works because the technology with which they were created has become obsolescent. Instead we should use criteria like elegance of solution, ideas that turn the constraints of technology into possibilities." Obsolescence "isn't an issue for Shakespeare," one man said. "Why should it be for us?"

When these people speak of literature, they mean Borges or Neruda or Nietzsche. They mean high literature, avant-garde literature, political literature. The first car, Hayles told the audience--the horseless carriage, as it was called--resembled its predecessor, the horse and carriage, more than it did the cars of today. In the same way, these works resemble, in content, their printed predecessors more than new media as they are used commercially.

Hayles showed several works on the big screen to her left. "Database," the project of graduate students Arianne de Souza e Silva and Fabian Walker, featured a room with a screen and a printer with a video camera and a keyboard. The viewer blacks out words as he or she reads, so rather than the traditional, durable text, you have something transitory, more like speech than print. The project was inspired by Borges' story "The Immortals," in which troglodytes incapable of speech turn out to be poets and other historical figures, like Homer.

In artist-writer Diane Slatterly's project, "Glide," the story is told of a future culture with no written language, only a visual one--glyphs made of semicircles. Another, "The Many Voices of Saint Caterina of Piedmonte," an interactive story by Silvia Rigon and Alison Walker, tells the story of the life of a medieval holy woman brought to ecstasy and visions by anorexia and malnutrition. The story unfolds through the voices of multiple women. Often these women were made to do penance by writing their autobiographies, thousands of pages long, and some of these can be accessed by hypertext. In this project, narrative layering of voices and image and text uncovers the political truth of their starvation and deprivation.

"Califa" is a project that tells the story of California using navigational apparatus so that the viewer can overlay maps of stars, fault lines and Chumash settlements and the changing landscape of California: freeways

over rivers over hilltops.

"These are the pioneers on the cutting edge of this field," Coover said. He pointed to a long history of intertwined word and image: illuminated manuscripts, pictographs, Zen calligraphy, the Torah, W.G. Sebald. In Coover's university classes, titled "The Game of Fiction" and "C.A.V.E. Writing," students play with text and image, wearing virtual reality glasses and carrying wands to navigate through that reality.

Coover and Hayles stressed that hypertext technology, rather than being exclusive, could be more available on the Web than books ever have been in public libraries. "Part of our task is to think through questions of access," Hayles said. "Young people of all classes are entranced by the Web. There is a great divide: The 18-year-olds I teach intuitively have a better understanding of strategies than the older graduate students. The visual vocabulary of video games is, for better or worse, pervasive. Electronic literature has a dual parentage: high literature and popular culture. It is a literary popular culture."

A representative from Finland described the chat rooms in his country, which often have audiences of hundreds of thousands of people in a land of just 5 million. He spoke about text-based television, about the possibilities of having viewers' diaries and even books on cable.

Between conference speakers there was a shuffle of wires and buttons and microphones, with an undercurrent of anxiety that things might not work. Most speakers used notes written in good old-fashioned composition books and note pads. The lights had to be off for the screen to be visible. "We don't know how to have it light and dark at the same time," said Victoria Vesna, a UCLA professor, "but we're working on it."

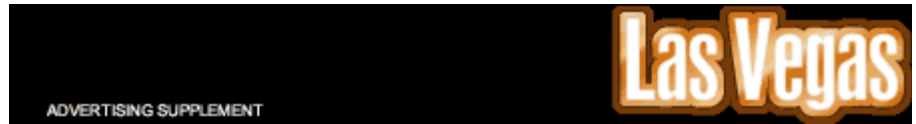
An overheard conversation in the hallway addresses whether "literature" is too loaded a term to apply to this art form. A young man worries that if so much time is spent on theories and definitions, electronic literature will become institutionalized just like all the other arts. Oppressors loom.

But all is not lost.

Jason Epstein, co-founder of the New York Review of Books, former head of Random House and the author of several books, spoke of the future of publishing, of ATMs for books, of machines placed, for example, in the basements of Starbucks that could print out a book, trim it and bind it minutes after being ordered by a customer on a computer upstairs.

More works in progress! Fewer deadlines! More money to authors as publishing costs decrease! He is not afraid. The future looks bright indeed.

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